

1985

Curran, Edward: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1985): Correspondence 18

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INDEPENDENT EDUCATION FUND

1749 P Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036 (202)462-3886

October 23, 1985

The Honorable Claiborne Pell
United States Senate
Washington, D. C. 20510

Dear Senator Pell:

The National Association of Independent Schools and the Independent Education Fund appreciate this opportunity to comment on some of the criticisms directed at Edward Curran's nomination to be chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Among our 900 member schools are many of the most distinguished educational institutions in the country. On the enclosed membership list, I am sure you will find schools in Rhode Island that will be familiar to you, and that you will agree they are a source of pride to the entire state.

Many of us in the independent secondary school community are disturbed that some of Mr. Curran's critics are reflecting a bias against precollegiate humanities education. The National Cathedral School here in Washington is one of the outstanding independent schools in the nation. Edward Curran was headmaster there from 1968 until 1980 -- a tenure, incidentally, quite a bit longer than the seven year average for independent school heads. Prior to that Mr. Curran was a teacher and English department head at St. John's School in Houston, Texas.

The mission of NEH can be ascertained from a variety of documents. According to the authorizing legislation, the "humanities" includes, but is not limited to, the study of language, linguistics, literature, history, jurisprudence, philosophy, archaeology, comparative religion, ethics, the arts, and certain humanistic aspects of the social sciences. The NEH publication, "Overview of Endowment Programs for 1984-85," states forthrightly that "those who work in the humanities undertake a fundamentally educational mission." The official United States Government Manual 1984-85 explains that the NEH was "established by Congress in 1965 to support research, education, and public programs in the humanities." We firmly believe that a professional career as an independent school English teacher, department head, headmaster and public administrator is entirely appropriate to the stated purposes of the Endowment.

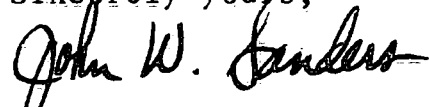
We wholeheartedly disagree with the opinion, recently expressed by American Council on Education president Robert H. Atwell, that it is not apparent from Mr. Curran's "background that he has been involved in teaching, scholarship, or administration in those disciplines broadly defined as the humanities." Even the briefest visit to The National Cathedral School and any one of our other members around the country would dispel any such notion.

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The testimony of the two witnesses who opposed Mr. Curran's nomination at the confirmation hearing seemed quite self-serving. Aside from the fact that their proposed qualifications for the chairmanship would have precluded the nomination of members of the Labor and Human Resources Committee, the two individuals, one the current president of the Modern Language Association, and the other a former executive director of that association, also managed to suggest that "academic" activities are exclusively postsecondary. Alas, one would have hoped for a more authentic usage, etymologically speaking, from two humanists. It was interesting to note their acknowledgment that the NEH is the single most important source of federal funds for their members.

Our association is anxious to provide additional information on the contributions independent schools are making to the humanities tradition in our culture. We respectfully submit these comments in the hope that the confirmation process will be assisted.

Sincerely yours,



John W. Sanders
Executive Vice President

enclosure